

Institutional Changes and Challenges for Agricultural Advisory Services in Africa

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Paper presented at the 19th European Seminar on Extension Education
15-19 September 2009, Assisi, Italy

Keywords: advisory services, Africa, capacity, reform

Introduction

Agricultural advisory services (AAS) have once again come to the fore of development efforts in Africa and elsewhere. Several new trends, models, and initiatives show that AAS are back on the agenda of governments, donors, and other stakeholders.

There are several ongoing trends in AAS throughout the continent. At the institutional level we observe a withdrawal of state interventions, which leads to models such as privatisation of service providers to improve the quality of service provision, or decentralisation to better take into account the demands of local communities. More generally we observe the emergence of new arrangements between stakeholders to build new AAS such as services directly managed by farmers' organisations or NGOs, or public-private partnerships including inter-professional bodies or contracts between a private firm and the state. The ongoing trend is moving from 'national advisory service systems' towards more pluralistic 'innovation systems' where all the stakeholders (AAS, research, education, private firms, producer organisations (PO), public services, etc.) have a role to play to promote more sustainable farming systems with better access to markets. The main challenge institutionally is therefore the development of sustainable institutions for service provision with capacity to provide more market-oriented agricultural advisory services (MOAAS).

At the same time, based on the demand of farmers and other actors (traders, processors, exporters), there is a progressive evolution advice content, from technical to economic, from production to marketing and natural resources management, from farm level to collective level, etc. With regards to methods, there is a shift from top-down approaches, which proved to usually be inefficient to improve farmers' practices, to more participatory approaches and a focus on learning processes to strengthen farmers' capacities to make their own decisions according to their objectives and resources. The main challenge here is the development of methods that can enhance participation and demand drive of the AAS.

Moreover, the ongoing trends pose a particular problem for the existing AAS staff to deal effectively with the changes. In many countries there are few mechanisms to train advisors taking into account initial education, refreshment courses, and also networking between advisors for exchanging experiences and knowledge. The challenge is to develop skills to work with new types of institutions, communicate with demanding farmers, and be professionally capable of providing MOAAS.

This paper will describe the current challenges of different AAS methods and approaches taking place in Africa. It will conclude with an initiative to build capacity in Africa to provide market-oriented agricultural advisory services on the continent.

Sustainable institutions for service provision

Currently the main challenge for AAS is the development of sustainable institutions for service provision. The key issues are the governance of AAS, including the role of each stakeholder, and financing. The arrangements between stakeholders are very diverse depending on different parameters, showing there is no single way to address the institutional framework. First, the farmers' demand construction is a long process as farmers express concerns and not demands. There is a need for a lot of interactions between different actors to formulate demands that both service providers and farmers can handle. Second, the building of the supply also is a complex process as many stakeholders have to work together to correctly address a demand. For example, to facilitate access to a specific market for farmers, the advisor has to jointly work with different stakeholders providing specific services (credit, inputs, certification, etc.) Taking into account these two elements, the free market of services rarely is well suited and capable to address the farmers' demands even if the farmers are able to pay for such a service. The hierarchy, meaning the provision of all services through public institutions, is no longer valid because this arrangement is not able to fully address the farmers' demands and because of the cost. Hybrid arrangements such as public-private and private-private partnerships are more likely to be efficient. The coordination among services could be in the charge of a specific service provider (NGO, private firm) or a PO. POs play a crucial role because they are more able to formulate farmer demands, negotiate with service providers, act as an indispensable intermediary in the service provision, or themselves provide full services to members.

In Uganda, the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) has attempted to increase market orientation through empowering farmers to demand and control extension services through an innovative public-private approach. NAADS targets the development and use of farmer institutions, and in the process empowers them to procure advisory services, manage links with marketing partners, and conduct demand-driven monitoring and evaluation of the advisory services.

The major challenge faced in NAADS is the capacity of private service providers to provide demand-driven and market-led services. This is compounded by the perceived absence of professional progression in the hierarchy of service providers. Other challenges include the transient presence of service providers, which overlooks longer term constraints facing farmers, and also provides little room for long term research extension linkages. The challenge of self regulation for quality service provision and internal management of abuse through formation of professional association have also been noted.

From farmers' perspectives, the key challenge is also related to their capacity to articulate the demand, procure, monitor, and quality assure service providers. Another challenge to such innovations is the perception of farmers over time, especially where desired farm inputs are inaccessible and unavailable, that they have paid too much for training, and thus resources should be channeled to inputs and technologies.

In conclusion, we observe new mechanisms for service provision. However, this needs to be made more sustainable. This can be done by strengthening POs to play a coordination role, with capacities to finance service provision. There is a need for designing rules to finance service provision through state supports, levees, etc.

Participation and demand drive in AAS

Demand drive of AAS requires participation of farmer organisations. This means that another challenge of AAS is to strengthen the capacity of farmer organizations to fully participate in

extension and to demand services for their members. Different methodological developments are addressing this challenge.

Farmer field schools (FFS) have pushed the frontier of participatory and demand-driven methods. FFS are a participatory method of learning, technology development, and dissemination based on adult-learning principles. Groups of 20-25 farmers typically meet weekly in an informal setting in their own environment with a facilitator. The FFS approach is an interactive and practical method of training, and empowers farmers to be their own technical experts on major aspects of localized farming systems. It assumes that farmers already have a wealth of knowledge. Farmers are facilitated to conduct their own research, diagnose and test problems, and come up with solutions. Three major learning tools of FFS include discovery-based learning exercises, group experiments, and agroecosystem analysis (Duveskog 2006). Additional defining characteristics include experiential education and group action. These processes help participants to experience, reflect, and make decisions.

Other examples of methodologies with potential to strengthen participation and demand for services are the Farmer Study Circles (FSC), which are implemented through farmer organisations in smaller membership groups, and the Facilitation Cycle (FC) that has been applied as a pilot in the extension service in Zambia. The FSC is based on farmer groups' self study of materials of their choice, developed for the purpose of solving specific issues of their farming systems and supplied by their farmer organisation at a higher level.

The FC in Zambian extension operates as a twin track strategy, with facilitation of demand formulation and action planning in groups, followed up with advice for households using the same principles (Chipeta et al. 2008). The FC includes processes where farmers are facilitated through their own market research, opportunity identification, action planning, needs assessment, resource mobilisation, implementation, and evaluation. The FC is supplemented by the Household Approach, which refers to the individual follow-up in households and the involvement of the whole family, including women and youth. The Household Approach ensures impact of the learning – meaning that the training in the groups is actually put into practise on the farm. A gender study, moreover, found extraordinary outcomes from the methodology in terms of gender equity in ability to formulate demands and reap benefits of the learning, which were attributed to the intensive follow-up in the households involving the whole family (Bishop-Sambrook and Wonani 2008).

There are other experiences in western Africa to promote a new advisory method called Management Advice for Family Farms (MAFF) (Faure et al. 2004). Some experiences have existed for many years and have gone beyond the experimental stage and are now institutionalised and concern a significant number of farmers. Currently advice based on such methods are provided by NGOs (Benin), Farmers' Organisations (Bénin, Guinée, Burkina), or cotton companies (Cameroun, Burkina).

The MAFF procedure is aimed at strengthening farmers' ability to manage their farm and improve their autonomy with regard to their environment. It is based on participatory methods providing (i) self-analyses to modify farmers' and advisers' representations and perceptions of the problems addressed, and (ii) decision aid tools based on technical and economic records (book-keeping) to modify knowledge and generate learning processes. In this respect, management is perceived as a cycle consisting of different phases: analysis, forecasting, action, monitoring, adjustment, and evaluation. Exchanges between farmers are

always enhanced by joint analysis of the results obtained by each, and by meetings between them (field visits, on-farm experiments, etc.), as these stimulate strong dynamics.

Although the aim is clearly to enable each farmer to analyse his or her situation, to specify objectives and improve decision making, MAFF is based in most cases on the group dynamics likely to lead to collective evolution of representations. However, more individualised, complementary advice is often needed, in particular on subjects requiring confidentiality and/or to solve specific questions (the choice of an investment, strong evolution of the farming system, etc.).

In conclusion, all of these techniques help to bring about fuller participation of farmer groups in AAS, strengthen their capacity to participate, and to demand services from providers. But there is a need to scale up the often-costly interventions and methods to reach more farmers.

Strengthen capacity and skills of advisors to deal with the changes

The current situation in African countries, whose extension systems are undergoing reform, is that a major constraint to the implementation of the new extension policies is the lack of capacity among staff at all levels to carry out the functions related to demand-driven services.

During a consultation in Malawi (www.neuchatelinitiative.net-Country Consultations), it was found that the common methodology for demand formulation (PRA) produces an overwhelming amount of demands, many of which are beyond the capacity and mandate of AAS. It is a great challenge to respond to the forthcoming demand for AAS and to coordinate the response. Another major gap is the understanding of different extension methodologies in a way that these can be used to their purpose. Moreover there are serious gaps in the capacity of extension staff to provide farm management advice and agribusiness development, which are the services most in demand.

In Kenya, the extension service is also undergoing transition and a new extension policy has been formulated (NASEP) that intends to pave the way for more demand-driven extension services provided by different actors. It has, however, been recognized by all stakeholders that the implementation of this policy will demand new skills and competencies from the service providers—both institutionally and personally. It has therefore been decided to develop a training program that can build the required capacity of agricultural advisers in demand-driven extension services.

A design mission in Kenya for the training program (Mathiassen and Henrikse 2008) identified the new roles that public and private extension staff foresee in the future, which will demand new skills. According to the stakeholders involved, the key roles for future advisors will include development of service provision; mobilization for change processes; development of farmer institutions; economic enterprise development; promotion of value chain analysis; promotion of natural resource management; and awareness creation on cross cutting issues. A training programme, which addresses the need for skills applying to these future roles is currently being developed.

Solution: Increase capacity for market-oriented agricultural advisory services

These issues are being brought together at the continental level through a joint proposal. The African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS), the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA), the Neuchâtel Initiative (NI), and the four African Regional Farmer Organisations (RFOs) have developed a joint proposal for building capacity for

market-oriented agricultural advisory services in Africa. The proposal aims to build capacity that can enhance demand drive, market orientation and pluralism in delivery of services, and the proposed programme will apply a learning approach by basing developments on knowledge gained through experiences that are collected, analysed, and shared. The proposal presents a mechanism for collaboration, networking and pooling of competencies in MOAAS among stakeholder institutions throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

The proposed partnership programme will work in three components, which directly respond to the above mentioned challenges, plus a fourth component which will facilitate AFAAS establishment and strengthening of its network:

1. Institutional and human resources development, which aims to respond both to the challenge of sustainable institutions with capacity as well as the challenge for the staff involved in providing AAS.
2. Capacity development of farmer organisations and other AAS organisations. This will build capacity in organisations to strengthen the voice of farmers in lobbying and advocacy for investments and policies in AAS as well as for provision of services.
3. Enhancement of an enabling environment through greater capacities for analysis and advocacy knowledge development. This will first of all be a facility for learning from ongoing projects and programmes, and will furthermore support a dialogue on new innovations to inspire the future MOAAS in Africa.
4. Strengthening of the AFAAS network and country chapters for national coordination.

It is expected that this partnership and networking among stakeholders in AAS throughout Africa will create much needed dynamics of innovation in MOAAS and learning from the collective experiences, and that institutions and organisations in Africa will use their increased capacity to facilitate small scale farmers' access to effective demand-led and market oriented agricultural advisory services, which will be required for them to increase their agricultural productivity and market access.

Conclusion

These initiatives, models, and trends point to different innovations that are changing the face of advisory services in Africa. We highlighted three main fields of innovations with new institutional arrangements, methodologies focusing more on learning process, and identifications of new profiles of advisors. These trends show that there is not one model of AAS but different way to provide services. However, more information is needed to provide evidence of real impact in the lives of African women and men farmers.

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